



The Spiritual Tragedy of 9/11

This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind...that hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it.

The president of the United States,
September 11, 2002

You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

Exodus 20:3-6

I was not prepared for what I saw that morning on the TV atop my bedroom dresser. After waking up my wife, we together watched in horror as the first and then second tower of the World Trade Center came crashing down, sealing the fate of what had to be hundreds trapped inside. My mind raced to panic-filled conclusions: There are additional planes heading for the West Coast. San Francisco is surely a target. Air Force jets will try to shoot them down. It will be chaos. Life as we've known it is spiraling out of control. Oh, my God!

In what for me was a despairing moment of clarity, I was forced to face my dark attachment to the "American Way of Life," a spiritually pernicious investment in a safe and predictable middle-class existence where the rule of law and the laws of the market assured me my right to personal fulfillment and infinite consumer choices. Invoking Psalm 23 at such a moment would have served merely as a pious incantation of faith in the scramble-intercept capabilities of our F-15 strike fighters. In scrambling, albeit internally, for a scenario that would keep my world intact, I experienced a humbling affinity with the disciple Peter who, when the heat was turned up, thrice

denied his Lord. For me that morning, the cock crowed.

This sinful, self-preservationist reflex awakened a deep sense of foreboding as we awaited the public response of our government in 9/11's wake. That evening on national television, the president declared that the United States would "make no distinction between the terrorists that committed these acts and those that harbor them." The foreign policy implications of this simple statement were as ominous as they were profound: America (i.e. the White House) reserves the right to act upon any foreign entity (sovereign nation or not) at its own discretion and according to its own definitions. With such an arrangement, any number of economic and geopolitical objectives (e.g., access to vital resources and markets) could be pursued and justified under the larger rubric of the "war on terror." And we were

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told, of course, that if you didn't square with this line of reasoning, you were "with the terrorists." We were to accept this because, after all, we are the "brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world!"

We must appreciate that government saber-rattling, the rousing of patriotism, and the strong-arming of public and global sentiment are standard fare for insecure (and opportunistic) empires throughout history. This is simply how fallen powers operate. What is tragic, however, is when the Church of Jesus Christ so easily appears to toss her ancient creeds in favor of the religious-sounding rhetoric of American exceptionalism and power. American flags adorn the sanctuary in an attempt, perhaps, to draw

spiritual significance from alignment with a nation on a salvific mission.

What is behind our flatfooted acquiescence? Is it the successful persuasion of evangelical leaders like the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, who maintained that "God is pro-war" and that "our God-given freedoms must be defended," or Rev. James Kennedy and Dr. Bill Bright, who declared in an open letter that the administration's policies are "just and right"? Furthermore, when our president in his 9/11 anniversary oratory misused New Testament scripture (John 1:5) by substituting America for Christ, the Bible-believing church hardly blinked. Was it our dulled spiritual senses or biblical illiteracy that produced our facility to tune out blasphemy when it came crashing into our living rooms? Or did a weak collective will readily accommodate a biblical interpretation of national matters that didn't place our personal faith at odds with the edicts of the state?

In *With God in the Crucible* (Abingdon Press, 2002), Peter Storey recounts his anguish as a pastor in the midst of apartheid South Africa: "Where did we lose the passionate belief that the gospel is given so that God's justice and peace might reign on earth as in heaven? How did we manage to so domesticate Jesus... that his radical demands for counterliving could melt so meekly into our cultural scene and accommodate with such servility to the demands of our Caesars?" With each dark sign that God mercifully enables us to discern in this day and time, it will become increasingly clear that Storey's question is one we must boldly ask of ourselves. ■

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